**What is Outdoor Education?**

Outdoor education is often thought of as an either/or situation: *either* kids are running around in the woods eating leaves, making fires, and building shelters and learning very little in the way of traditional brick and mortar education, *or* they are doing classroom work in an outdoor setting, complete with worksheets, clipboards, and chairs and tables. Outdoor education that meets the needs of the whole child is a hybrid of the two: the natural landscape and all of its creatures becomes an alternative to the four walls of a classroom in the best possible way, supporting children in their natural intellectual curiosity and desire for inquiry, in their need to be up and moving their bodies, in their relationship to the land and to one another, and in their capacity as learners to explore the ways in which traditional classroom subjects emerge from this relationship. The natural world becomes a place where learning has a physical location that allows children to connect what they learn in the classroom through real-world application. For example:

- Science emerges from the discovery and observation of multiple natural phenomena, such as a pond and beaver dam.
- Math emerges from data collected during a longitudinal observation of plant growth or snowfall, and
- Applied geometry and subsequent engineering comes about through wilderness shelter building of all kinds.
- Literacy bubbles up through the examination of field guides after the discovery of animal tracks, or field journals kept each day. It also emerges through the telling of folk tales around a cozy fire.
- Social studies is ever present, as students explore the natural landscape and uncover - through stone walls, “wild” plants cultivated by the local indigenous people, cellar holes, berms - the ways in which human habitation has changed over centuries, and all of the implications of this inhabitation, or as they learn how to build and tend a fire.
- Physical Education is present in wilderness awareness games, through group exploration walks, and through the simple act of walking to a study site or gathering fire materials.

- The arts are present in learning crafts and skills associated with the outdoors, such as coal burning, tool and basket making, and making dyes from natural materials, sketching and drawing, or making sculptures and collage.

Outdoor education experiences provide a way for kids to learn on a visceral level, and are often positive for kids who like to move. They are also ideal for those students who prefer to focus in on a particular line of inquiry. They provide a naturally differentiated environment, where every student can find the edges of their zone of proximal development (their “learning edge”). In general:

- Outdoor education is about engaging with the vector of place as a way of more deeply learning all of the subjects students encounter during a standard school day.
- Outdoor education can incorporate not just science, but social studies, English Language Arts (as well as other languages), math, the arts, and physical education.
- Outdoor education supports the whole student, including the body, mind, and social/emotional aspects of learning.
- Outdoor education is a highly malleable format with regard to instructional differentiation.
- The outdoor education experience is most effective when paired in a collaborative way with classroom learning - when taken into the classroom for reflection, refinement, and the identification of further routes of inquiry.
- When engaged to its fullest, outdoor education provides myriad opportunities for teachers to funnel curriculum through the lens of student interest.
- Outdoor education is most effective when inquiry and project based.

Of course, many of the positive points above can be reframed as challenges. That is where the program leader comes in, using creative thinking, compassionate action, and a collaborative spirit to support kids and help teachers connect the experience to the classroom. This program leader serves as a guide for the children, and a bridge to the classroom, otherwise many of their discoveries occur in the moment and are lost to the next, and the time does just look like kids running around in the woods all day. This professional should ideally:

- Know the landscape and is ready to support and extend study (bear sign, for example, can easily be missed if you don't know what to look for), or knows how to find information related to the landscape in living experts or in field guides.
- Have experience with children in a traditional classroom and know how to support their growth as independent learners.
- Have experience with supporting children in the challenges of learning in an outdoor setting (rain, snow, and ice conditions are all excellent opportunities for learning if one knows how to be warm and safe).
- Be able to easily connect the outdoor learning experience with classroom inquiry and the Vermont learning standards.
- Be a strong collaborator who can work with the classroom teacher to connect outdoor learning and curriculum with classroom learning and curriculum.

More and more schools are choosing to incorporate outdoor education experiences into their traditional, indoor education models. There are multiple scholarly articles now available on outdoor education, as well as teacher education programs that provide a focus on outdoor education. Some schools that have incorporated and even made documentaries about it, including the film *Turning School Inside Out,* about a public school in Chesterfield, New Hampshire who did it with a small budget, community elbow grease, and school administrators and teachers with a can-do attitude.

**Why is Outdoor Education Important?**

Many studies have now proven that being outdoors improves emotional well being, focus and concentration, and flexibility of mind. In addition, being outdoors and engaging in nature connection practices improves our understanding of the relationship between humans and the planet, and makes people more likely to take care of it. Learning outdoors allows children to experience real-world expiration of inquiry and application of concepts. For example: discovering animal sign, exploring ideas about what it might be, and using field guides for research, then extending this discovery into further exploration into this individual animal, its habitat, position in the food web, current relationship to humans, and associated research and expression of knowledge and understanding through writing, drawing, data presentation, etc.

**How Can Outdoor Education be Applied at Marlboro Elementary?**

**Location:**

While there may be some space on the school grounds for an outdoor classroom space, there is currently not enough room for the kind of wild spaces that support outdoor education and nature connection. There are a number of possible places in town where it could be done, with relative ease of transportation. Many of these landowners will not require a lease, but will want the school to hold the appropriate insurance. The ideal space should have:

- Land enough for students to engage in wilderness type exploration and guided "wandering" and discovery.
- Wetlands, streams, or a pond.
- Different types of woodlands and other habitats.
- Open areas for game play (though games can also be easily adapted to wooded areas).
- Proximity to a road for emergency transportation.
- At least one area for an outdoor gathering place where classes can come together in a circle (a fire pit is ideal for colder months).
- A space where there is already a primitive shelter, or materials and an area where one or more can be built.
- An indoor classroom space where teachers can bring small groups of students for direct instruction, if needed. This would, obviously, require sanitizing at the end of the day.
- In many outdoor programs, students are educated in proper wilderness toileting. Should this not be appropriate for this program, as a large number of people would be visiting the land, an outhouse or other portable toilet should be available. This would, obviously, require regular servicing, sanitizing at the end of the day.

**Possible Typical Full Day:**

*7:45 - 8:15: Staff arrives and prepares for the day*

8:15 - 8:30 am: Arrival

8:30 - 9:00: Outdoor wilderness awareness building game

9:00 - 9:15: Morning circle (with fire during colder months)

9:15 - 10:30: Morning exploration and investigations - guided learning time

10:30 - 10:45: Snack

10:45 - 12:00: Exploration and investigations - building on the morning

12:00 - 12:30: Lunch

12:30 - 1:15: Full body game; outdoor play
1:15 - 2:00: Reflection and integration - coming together to reflect on the investigations of the day.
2:00 - 2:30: End of day closing circle and story around the fire
2:30 - 2:45: Pick-up
*2:45 - 3:30: Staff prep and planning time.*

**Possible Typical Half Day:**
*7:45 - 8:15: Staff arrives and prepares for the day*
8:15 - 8:30 am: Arrival
8:30 - 8:45: Outdoor wilderness awareness building game
8:45 - 9:00: Morning circle (with fire during colder months)
9:00 - 10:00: Morning exploration and investigations - guided learning time
10:00 - 10:15: Snack
10:15 - 11:30: Reflection and integration - coming together to reflect on the investigations of the day.
11:30 - 12:15: Full body game; outdoor play
12:15 - 12:30: End of day closing circle and story around the fire
12:30 - 12:45: Pick-up
*12:45 - 1:30: Staff prep and planning time.*

**Logistics of meals and transporting students to and from site:**
*Meals:*

- Students could receive a paper bag lunch the previous day to bring with them to the outdoor program the following day.
- Meals could be picked up by classroom teacher or outdoor program teacher in the morning from the school and brought to site that day.
- Meals could be delivered to the outdoor site by bus around snacktime (this would require student groups to stay close to the drop-off and pick-up location for the morning, which is not ideal.

*Transportation:*
Buses and/or families could bring students directly to the outdoor education site and pick up there at the end of programming. For the half day option, students would need to be transported by bus back to the school.

**Addressing the Possible Negatives:**
*What if some kids really dislike being outdoors this much?*
Some children take to being outside with more zeal than others. Especially during this time, when we have come to rely on screens for so much of what we need, many kids have become accustomed to being indoors and working with digital devices. It is absolutely true that, just as some kids dislike certain subjects, not every child will be excited about forest days. However, as stated above, the positives of this experience are great, and while we may not immediately see every child feeling excited about outdoor education, every single one will benefit from the time learning outside and connecting with the natural world.

*What about inclement weather?*
There is no doubt that committing to outdoor education also means committing to making sure that every child has the right gear to be outside in all weather. It is important that, in helping students to really experience all the benefits of learning outside, we do not send the message that we can and should only be outdoors when the weather is “nice”. Being outdoors in snow, rain, wind, and ice gives students the opportunity to observe the natural world in all of its stages, with the additional benefit of the increased self esteem that comes with overcoming challenges. As the saying goes: “There is no bad weather, only bad gear or lack of preparation”. Having trained staff who know how to recognize and treat the signs of pre-hypothermia, as well as some dry shelter and a good fire pit go a long way in helping kids to discover the wonders of being outdoors when everyone else is hiding from the weather inside.

*What if classroom teachers aren’t trained to do outdoor education, or are not that interested in it:*
This is where the program coordinating teacher comes in. This person is like a specials teacher for the outdoors, who can collaborate with classroom teachers to support curricular connections between what students are learning in the classroom and during their time outside. While students are on site, this individual would lead the group and shape the day, collaborating with the classroom teacher as much or as little as that teacher has interest. This teacher can also

potentially come into the classroom to further support the classroom teacher in integrating what students have learned and experienced at the outdoor site. Ideally, the outdoor education program should be as integrated as possible with the brick and mortar curriculum and serve as an extension and support, as well as in inspiration, to what is going on during traditional classroom days. However, if classroom teachers prefer not to integrate curriculum, the outdoor program should be able to provide a stand alone curriculum that continues to support children in their classroom learning.